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Social Compass 2007; 54; 33

DOI: 10.1177/0037768607074151

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Beyond Beliefs: Religion and the Sociology of Religion in America

What is the relationship between the official teachings of religious bodies and the beliefs of individual adherents in the United States today? At first glance, this question appears rather straightforward. One simply needs to identify religious bodies, specify their teachings and empirically establish the connection between those teachings and adherents' beliefs. But establishing any of these elements is anything but simple. To begin to untangle this knotty subject, the author first uses a restrictive definition of religious bodies, teachings, and beliefs, focusing on the core doctrinal teachings of clearly identifiable religious denominations. He then steps back and takes a broader view of the situation using a less restrictive definition, exploring the influence of affiliation with religious "families" on individuals' moral beliefs. The author concludes with some thoughts about how both religion and the sociology of religion in America are moving beyond beliefs.

Key words: beliefs · denominations · doctrine · post-denominationalism · United States

Quelle est aujourd'hui la relation entre les enseignements officiels des organes religieux et les croyances des fidèles individuels aux États-Unis? Au premier abord, la réponse à cette question paraît plutôt claire. Il suffirait simplement d'identifier les organes religieux, de préciser leurs enseignements et d'établir empiriquement le lien entre ces enseignements et les croyances des fidèles. Mais établir ces éléments est tout sauf simple. Afin de démêler ce sujet épineux, l'auteur utilise d'abord une définition restrictive des organes religieux, des enseignements et des croyances, en se focalisant sur les enseignements doctrinaux centraux de confessions religieuses clairement identifiables. Il dresse ensuite une vue d'ensemble de la situation, en utilisant une définition moins restrictive et en explorant l'influence de l'affiliation avec des "familles" religieuses sur les croyances morales individuelles. L'auteur conclut avec quelques réflexions sur la manière dont à la fois la religion et la sociologie de la religion aux États-Unis vont au-delà des croyances.

Mots-clés: confessions · croyances · doctrine · États-Unis · post-confessionnalisme

The Problem

What is the relationship between the official teachings of religious bodies and the religious beliefs of individual adherents in the United States today? At first glance, this question appears rather straightforward. One simply needs to identify specific religious bodies, specify their official teachings, and empirically establish the connection (or lack thereof) between those teachings and the individuals' beliefs. But this is easier said than done; establishing any of these elements is anything but simple.

What Religious Bodies?

To speak of official teachings is to speak of religious structures that have the legitimate authority to promulgate such teachings. The clearest example of such a religious authority structure in the US context is the denomination. Although the term is historically derived from the Protestant Reformation, it is used more generally to describe religious bodies or associations of congregations that are united under a common historical and theological umbrella. Thus, the Roman Catholic Church and Seventh Day Adventists are considered two of many Christian denominations, and some have even written about Jewish “denominationalism” (Lazerwitz et al., 1998). In fact, there are over 2,000 denominations in the USA (Mead et al., 2005), and the vast majority of Americans identify themselves religiously using denominational labels such as Baptist, Methodist, and the like (Kosmin et al., 2001).¹

So far, so good. But not all religious authority structures are located in denominations. As Chaves (1993: 151) observes, “Religious authority may also be located in a single charismatic leader or in a congregation. In other words, religious authority structures may be more or less formal, centralized, and bureaucratized.” Where authority is more formal, centralized, and bureaucratized—as in a denomination—official teachings are the easiest to identify. But some of the most important developments in American religion—especially evangelicalism and nondenominational megachurches—are taking place outside of traditional denominational boundaries, rendering the identification of relevant religious bodies problematic.

What Teachings and Beliefs?

Assuming we can identify religious bodies, we must still answer the question: What teachings and beliefs? According to Stark and Glock (1968: 14), a fundamental dimension of religious commitment is the “expectations that the religious person will hold a certain theological outlook, that he will acknowledge the truth of the tenets of the religion. Every religion maintains some set of beliefs which adherents are expected to ratify.” The challenge, however, is that “the content and scope of beliefs will vary not only between religions, but often within the same religious tradition” (1968: 14). For example, Stark and Glock (1968: 22) note:

Virtually everyone agrees that the central feature of Christian commitment is belief. But contemporary theologians disagree considerably over what it is that Christians ought to believe. As a result it is nearly impossible to select any universally acceptable standards either to distinguish the believer from the nonbeliever or to reflect degrees and kinds of convictions”.

This challenge obviously applies equally to religious traditions other than Christianity. What should Muslims believe? Hindus? Scientologists? To complicate matters further, we must distinguish between different types of teachings and beliefs. Glock and Stark, for example, distinguish between *warranting* beliefs, *purposive* beliefs, and *implementing* beliefs, and note that different religious traditions emphasize these beliefs to different extents. Warranting beliefs endorse the existence not only of the divine but of a particular type of divinity—e.g., a Trinitarian God, the second person of which was born of a virgin. Purposive beliefs “explain divine purpose and define man’s role with regard to that purpose” (Glock and Stark, 1965: 24), e.g., beliefs about sin and salvation. Finally, implementing beliefs “establish what is the proper conduct of man toward God and toward his fellow man for the realization of the divine purpose” (Glock and Stark, 1965: 25). These beliefs lead to the various ethical teachings of religious traditions, such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and so on. As we will see below, sociologists have been far more concerned with socio-political and moral (i.e., implementing) beliefs than with core doctrinal (i.e., warranting and purposive) beliefs.

How to Connect Official Teachings and Individual Beliefs?

Even if we can identify specific teachings of specific religious bodies, it is methodologically difficult to study the connection between those teachings and individual beliefs. In the first place, many religious bodies are so small that most survey samples are unlikely to include any of their members. For example, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church claims 69,610 total members in the United States (Mead et al., 2005: 137). The chances of a random sample of 1,500 Americans including even a single member are slim. Second, the uniqueness of the different bodies’ teachings makes developing a survey instrument that is valid across denominations difficult. No one would even attempt to design a study that validly operationalized the distinctive beliefs contained in key credal statements such as the “Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed”, “The Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church”, “Tenets of the Mother Church” of the “Church of Christ Scientist”, and “The Richmond Declaration of Faith of the Society of Friends” (Pelikan, 2003).

For both these reasons, case studies of particular religious bodies would seem to be the best avenue for connecting official teachings and individual beliefs. Of course, the trade-off with this approach is that it renders generalization across bodies impossible. By contrast, one could maximize generalizability by focusing on lowest common denominator beliefs such as “Do you believe in God?” But in doing so, we only learn a little bit, albeit about a lot of people.

A Provisional Solution

Some of these problems are insurmountable, suggesting a need to approach the issue in a very different way. That ultimate conclusion notwithstanding, to begin to untangle this knotty subject, I first use a restrictive definition of religious bodies, teachings, and beliefs, focusing on the core doctrinal teachings of clearly identifiable religious denominations. I then **step back** and take a broader view of the situation using a less restrictive definition, exploring the influence of religious “families” rather than specific denominations on the moral beliefs of individual adherents. I conclude with some thoughts about how both religion and the sociology of religion in America are moving beyond beliefs.

Faith: Core Doctrinal Teachings of American Denominations

In terms of official teachings and individual beliefs, the heart of the matter is core doctrine, where *doctrine* is understood as “what the church believes, teaches, and confesses”. As historian Jaroslav Pelikan (2003: 65) writes, “believing . . . is inseparable from doctrine and teaching”. The first-person singular of the Latin verb “I believe” (*credo*) is the basis for the English word *creed*, an authoritative formula of religious beliefs that belongs to a church and expresses its tradition. Confessing a creed concretely expresses the unity of the authoritative teachings of a religious body and the beliefs of the individual adherent, as when Roman Catholics throughout the world gather together in worship and profess “*Credo in unum Deum . . .*”—the Creed of Nicaea. More generally, the Apostle’s Creed stands historically as a succinct summary of some core doctrines of western Christianity. As such, we might expect there to be little variation in levels of adherence to these beliefs according to denominational affiliation. As one American pastor hopefully put it, “We all believe in Jesus Christ. We all use the Apostolic Creed” (Wuthnow, 1988: 93).

Surprisingly few sociologists have attempted to assess the extent to which individual Christians from different denominations adhere to these doctrines, perhaps because uniformity of belief has been assumed. Over many decades of survey research, nearly all Americans have claimed to believe in the existence of God or a universal spirit (Greeley, 1989). But believing in God is not a *warranting* belief in the sense that Glock and Stark (1965) suggest. Glock and Stark look at a variety of different Christian beliefs, including some which seem to operationalize core doctrines embodied in the central creeds of the Christian tradition. In particular, they ask about the divinity of Jesus, his virgin birth, and his second coming, and find some denominational variation in levels of belief. Although 94% of Catholics and 86% of all Protestants believe that “Jesus is the Divine Son of God and I have no doubts about it” or “While I have some doubts, I feel basically that Jesus is Divine”, only 68% of Congregationalists and 76% of Methodists claim these beliefs. By contrast, 99% of Southern Baptists and 98% of Missouri

Synod Lutherans claim them (Stark and Glock, 1968: 33). The same pattern is even more evident when they ask about whether it is “completely true” that “Jesus was born of a virgin”. Some 99% of Southern Baptists, 92% of Missouri Synod Lutherans, and 81% of Roman Catholics affirm this doctrine, while only 21% of Congregationalists, 34% of Methodists, and 39% of Episcopalians do so (1968: 34).

These variations suggest a need to consider the relationship between teaching and belief not generally but in particular denominations. Catholicism is the best case for such a consideration because the authority structure is so clear, and there has been some good recent research on the relationship between official teaching and individual belief. In a 1999 survey of American Catholics, D’Antonio and his colleagues found variation among Catholics in adherence to church doctrine according to issue, level of commitment to the church, and generation. For example, 62% of Catholics disagree that a person can be a good Catholic “without believing that in the Mass, the bread and wine actually become the body and blood of Jesus”. But adherence to this belief varies widely if broken down by level of commitment to the Church: 84% of the highly committed maintain this belief, while only 37% of those with low levels of commitment do (D’Antonio et al., 2001: 43–44). Although not as extreme, variation exists also in Catholics’ beliefs about the importance of the Church’s teachings about Mary as the Mother of God. Overall, 70% of Catholics respond that these teachings are very important. But when broken down by generation, 83% of the pre-Vatican II generation hold this belief to be very important while only 62% of the post-Vatican II generation do so (D’Antonio et al., 2001: 46–47). So, those more committed to the Catholic Church are more orthodox in their beliefs, but the proportion of Catholics who are highly committed is declining. This is related to the generational change that is at the heart of the explanation given by D’Antonio et al. As the more orthodox pre-Vatican II generation of Catholics is gradually replaced by the less orthodox post-Vatican II generation, the trend away from strong adherence to core doctrines will likely continue.

In their work on mainline Protestant Baby Boomers, Hoge and his colleagues (1994) look specifically at individuals confirmed in churches associated with what became in 1983 the Presbyterian Church (USA), or PCUSA. The PCUSA is the liberal Presbyterian denomination par excellence, but has its roots in the ideas of John Calvin specifically and Reformed theology generally (Mead et al., 2005). Indeed, its authoritative Book of Confessions contains the Scots Confession, the Westminster Confession, and the Shorter and Larger Catechisms. Calvinist and Reformed theology remain at the core of Presbyterian beliefs. Among these are the sovereignty of God, the authority of the scripture, and justification by grace through faith. The issue of predestination also looms large in Presbyterian doctrine. Unfortunately, rather than focusing on these Presbyterian doctrinal distinctives, Hoge et al. (1994: 59) look at a generic version of what they call “traditional Protestant doctrine” which “centers on the divinity of Christ, the inspiration of scripture, and the promise of life after death”. On many of these measures, they find considerable orthodoxy of belief. For example, 78% of PCUSA

Baby Boomer confirmands respond that Jesus Christ was God or the son of God, and 83% reject the idea that there is no life after death.

But in other ways, the individuals in this Presbyterian study seem less orthodox. While 60% agree or strongly agree that “the only absolute truth for humankind is in Jesus Christ”, only 29% agree or strongly agree that “only followers of Jesus Christ and members of His church can be saved”. Combining these two responses, Hoge et al. (1994: 63) find only 28% of their Boomer sample see Christ as the exclusive pathway to salvation. This is not just a Boomer phenomenon, either, as only 34% of pre-Boomers hold Christian exclusivist views. But it is not altogether clear that this salvational universalism should be considered unorthodox, for as a liberal Protestant body, the PCUSA does not stress exclusivism. Indeed, the very openness of the denomination has led to a protest movement from within called the “Confessing Church Movement” that seeks to stress more traditional Reformed doctrinal essentials, including first and foremost: “That Jesus Christ alone is Lord of all and the way of salvation”.²

This same conflict can be seen with respect to official teachings and individual beliefs about the Bible. Only 23% of PCUSA Boomer confirmands maintain that “the Bible is God’s Word and all it says is true”. Some 69% hold that “the Bible was written by men inspired by God, but it contains some human errors”. In this, they are quite in line with liberal Presbyterian orthodoxy as found in the Confession of 1967 (also part of the PCUSA Book of Confessions). This statement was the denomination’s first new confession in over 300 years and reformed Presbyterian doctrine in response to modern ideas and movements. For example, while maintaining the authority of scripture, the Confession of 1967 was heavily influenced by modernist views of the Bible:

The Bible is to be interpreted in the light of its witness to God’s work of reconciliation in Christ. The Scriptures, given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are nevertheless the words of men, conditioned by the language, thought forms, and literary fashions of the places and times at which they were written. They reflect views of life, history, and the cosmos which were then current. The church, therefore, has an obligation to approach the Scriptures with literary and historical understanding.³

Thus, although it does not consciously seek to explore specific doctrinal teachings of the PCUSA, Hoge’s study nonetheless helps to establish some connection between denominational views and individual beliefs.

The Assemblies of God (AOG) is a Pentecostal denomination founded in the United States in 1914. Since then, it has experienced remarkable growth, ranking as the tenth largest American denomination in 2004 (Lindner, 2004) and gaining 221% in market share for US denominations between 1940 and 2000 (Finke and Stark, 2005: 246). According to Poloma’s (1989: 14) definitive study, there is an overall “lack of variance among Assemblies of God respondents on traditional measures of belief”. Therefore, she focuses on one belief which is a clear doctrinal distinctive of the AOG: “The insistence that glossolalia [speaking in tongues] is ‘evidence’ of Spirit baptism”. This “is a doctrine of the Assemblies of God that is not shared by non-Pentecostal conservative Christians and is even disputed by other Pentecostal sects”

(Poloma, 1989: 14). It can be found in Article 8 of the “The Statement of Fundamental Truths of the Assemblies of God”, which dates to 1916. In her survey of AOG pastors, Poloma (1989: 40) found 98% agreement with this doctrine. By contrast, only 54% of Poloma’s membership survey respondents express agreement with this core doctrine. So, within the AOG, spirit baptism and speaking in tongues are widespread, even if adherence to the denomination’s doctrines concerning these phenomena are not.

Unfortunately, there have been precious few studies like those just reviewed which offer any insight into the question of connecting doctrinal teachings and individual beliefs within specific American denominations. Concerning purposive beliefs, who has examined Lutherans’ beliefs about justification by grace through faith, Presbyterians’ beliefs about predestination, or Methodists’ beliefs about the attainability of human perfection? If such studies exist, they have not been advertised well enough because I have not been able to find them. It seems clear that sociologists of religion in America have not been preoccupied with understanding the distinctive warranting and purposive beliefs of individual members of different religious bodies. And perhaps this is just as well. Although our very starting point was that every religion maintains some set of beliefs which its followers are expected to affirm, it may be misguided to focus too much on particular beliefs. The more denominationally specific the teaching we consider, the less uniformity there is in individual belief, even in a “strict” church like the AOG.

It is also the case that some of the most important developments in American religion today are not denominational. Evangelical Protestantism is a case in point. By many accounts, it is the most dynamic sector of the American religious economy (Finke and Stark, 2005). But in *American Evangelicalism*, Smith argues that evangelicalism is a *transdenominational* movement carried by parachurch institutions:

No single, authoritative theological or political confession or creed binds this diverse array of believers together and sets them apart from their theological and sociological relatives . . . Instead, evangelicals are coordinated by a set of minimal, baseline, supra-denominational theological beliefs. (Smith, 1998: 87)

Moreover, Smith (1998: 86) finds that 20% of evangelicals belong to non-denominational congregations. The growth of nondenominational churches and identities is another important development in the contemporary scene. This is evidenced organizationally in “seeker churches” and “megachurches” (Sargeant, 2000). Individually, it can be seen in the rising percentage of Americans who claim no particular denominational identity. In the 2001 American Religious Identification Survey, 1.2% describe themselves as “nondenominational” and another 9% describe themselves as “Christian” or “Protestant” without specifying a denominational identity (Kosmin et al., 2001).

Of course, the majority of Christians continue to use denominational labels to describe themselves, even when they do not profess their denomination’s teachings. Although there are many possible reasons for this, one immediate explanation is that individuals simply *do not know* what their

denominations teach. Lack of a correlation between denominational teaching and individual belief isn't necessarily an indicator of voluntarism or active rebellion, but may simply reflect ignorance, illiteracy, or even apathy. According to a United Methodist man interviewed by Smith (1998), "I've been an officer in the church on various occasions, Chairman of the Board, etc. But I don't really know the Methodist discipline that well, any better than I probably know the Koran." Indeed, many believers today seem woefully ignorant of the most basic facts of their faith. To wit: less than half of Americans can name all four Christian Gospels (46%) or know who delivered the Sermon the Mount (42%) (Greeley, 1989: 17).

But what does the future hold? One way to gauge this is by looking at the religious beliefs and literacy of youth—the coming generation. In his national study of American youth, Smith (2005) finds that teenagers are not alienated from organized religion, as many suppose, but this is due in large part to the fact that religion places no particular burdens on them, least of all with respect to doctrinal beliefs. Like most Americans, almost all teenagers profess a belief in God in response to a closed-ended survey question, but open-ended interviews reveal little substantive content to that belief (Smith, 2005: 135):

Interviewer: When you think of God, what image do you have of God?

Teen: [*Yawning*]

I: What is God like?

T: Um, good. Powerful.

I: Okay, anything else?

T: Tall.

I: Tall?

T: Big.

I: Do you think God is active in people's lives or not?

T: Ah, I don't know.

I: You're not sure?

T: Different people have different views of him.

I: What about your view?

T: What do you mean?

I: Do you think God is active in your life?

T: In my life? Yeah.

And so on. Overall, Smith (2005: 131) characterizes the vast majority of his interviewees as "*incredibly inarticulate* about their faith, their religious beliefs and practices, and its meaning or place in their lives".

Whether this is simply an age effect or represents a broader period or cohort effect remains to be seen. But given the high levels of basic literacy among American "Echo Boomers" today, this particular inarticulacy would seem to reinforce the idea that the specific doctrinal teachings of denominations are fading in significance in comparison to other aspects of religiosity in America. If the situation in England is best described by Davie (1994) as "believing without belonging", the situation for many in the USA may best be described as "belonging without believing".

Morals: Broader Teachings of American Religious Families

If we make two conceptual and methodological moves, we greatly expand the body of sociological literature connecting religious bodies and individual beliefs. The first move is to look not at specific denominations but to group them into broader religious *families*. This reduces the amount of analytical complexity involved in modeling the connection by allowing classification into three to six families rather than hundreds of denominations. The second move is to look not at warranting or purposive beliefs but at implementing beliefs. Sociologists have been far more interested in the role of religious affiliation in the moral, ethical, and political beliefs of Americans than they have in understanding their religious beliefs, *per se*.

In *American Mainline Religion*, Roof and McKinney revitalized the concept of families in understanding American religion. They note that, especially compared to the 19th century when denominational traditions mattered more, today “the sharpest differences are found along broader lines” (Roof and McKinney, 1987: 78). They distinguish between six major religious families in America—Catholics, Jews, liberal Protestants, moderate Protestants, black Protestants, and conservative Protestants—and categorize people into these families according to their denominational affiliation. Others have since improved on this approach. For example, Steensland and his colleagues (2000: 297) also divide Americans into six categories based on their denominational affiliation: mainline Protestant, evangelical Protestant, black Protestant, Roman Catholic, Jewish, and other. They distinguish between different families of Protestantism in the first instance on the basis of race, noting the historical separation of black and white Protestant denominations and the unique views of freedom and justice within the Black Church resulting from the oppression of its members. Within white Protestant denominations, they distinguish between evangelicals that tend to stress pietistic elements of practice and premillennial eschatology and mainline Protestants that emphasize the ritualist elements of practice and postmillennial eschatology (Steensland et al., 2000: 294). These familial differences are reflected in the social views of individuals.

Whether using Roof and McKinney’s (1987), Steensland et al.’s (2000), or another classification system, a number of studies have found systematic differences in moral views by tradition. In general, due to their reverence for the authority of scripture, the oppositional attitude they cultivate toward liberalizing trends in modern society, and their stress on conformity of the individual to God’s plan, evangelical or fundamentalist Protestants are more morally conservative than other Americans (Smith, 1998). Lacking a literalist view of scripture and an oppositional attitude toward society, and stressing the importance of individual autonomy rather than religious authority, mainline Protestants are more moderate in their moral beliefs (Roof and McKinney, 1987). Although Roman Catholicism maintains a strong centralized teaching authority which has promulgated arguably the most extensive and comprehensive body of moral and ethical teachings, Catholics themselves have become much more pluralistic and voluntaristic as they have moved into the mainstream of American society. Hence,

American Catholics are typically more conservative than mainline Protestants but also more equivocal than evangelical Protestants in their moral beliefs (D'Antonio et al., 2001). Jews are not often included in these studies, and when they are, denominational differences within American Judaism are not examined due to small sample sizes. But as the most highly educated religious family in America and one with a history of extreme persecution, it is not surprising that Lazerwitz et al. (1998: 58) find all Jews, with the exception of the Orthodox (who are only 6% of the Jewish population), to be more politically liberal than even liberal Protestants.

Overall, then, evangelical Protestants are the most morally conservative religious family, followed by Catholics, mainline Protestants, and Jews. This pattern is found quite consistently across a number of issues, including abortion, cloning, euthanasia, gender roles, and sexuality. For example, on abortion, Steensland et al. (2000: 306–307) find that evangelical Protestants have the most conservative views, followed closely by Catholics. Jews have by far the most liberal views, followed by mainline Protestants. Similarly, Evans (2002a) finds evangelical Protestants express the most pro-life views, followed by Catholics, Black Protestants and mainline Protestants. Moreover, from 1972 forward, evangelical Protestants have become *more* opposed to abortion, while Catholics and mainline Protestants have remained constant, creating a pattern of polarization between evangelical and mainline Protestants (Evans, 2002a). Burdette et al. (2005) find conservative Protestants to most strongly oppose physician-assisted suicide. By contrast, once church attendance is taken into account, liberal Protestants, moderate Protestants, and Catholics do not differ significantly from non-affiliates in their views on this issue. Even in a case like human cloning, in which the entire US population expresses opposition, those who self-identify as born-again or evangelical Christians are more opposed to cloning, while liberal Protestants and Catholics do not differ in their opposition to cloning from the general public (Evans, 2002b).

So, across a number of issues, there does seem to be a pattern wherein these religious families array themselves from morally conservative to liberal. But these patterns of between-family differences, especially the consistent moral conservatism of the evangelical family, can tend to obscure some other important observations that discount the importance of religious traditions in shaping ethical views. First of all, individuals of *any* religious affiliation, other than Jews, are more morally conservative than those of *no* religious affiliation. Even mainline Protestants have more conservative views on abortion than the religiously unaffiliated (Steensland et al., 2000), suggesting a general effect of being affiliated with any Christian denomination over being unaffiliated. Similarly, in their study of attitudes toward physician-assisted suicide, Burdette et al. (2005: 88) found that church attendance and strength of religious affiliation strongly reduced the effect of religious family affiliation and entirely eliminated the effect of affiliation among moderate Protestants and Catholics.

Second, although evangelical Protestants seem to be increasingly unified in their moral conservatism, mainline Protestants and Catholics are becoming more internally polarized. Evans's (2002a) evidence for this on the abortion

issue suggests that Wuthnow (1988) was correct, at least in part, when he famously discussed the declining significance of denominations. This seems a logical consequence of the high levels of autonomy claimed by Catholics and mainline Protestants, as reported by D'Antonio et al. (2001) and Hoge et al. (1994), in comparison to evangelical Protestants. To wit: Smith (1998: 23) reports that 75% of evangelicals maintain that absolute moral standards exist, while 66% of liberal Protestants and 62% of Catholics believe that there are no absolutes and people decide right and wrong for themselves. Evangelical Protestantism, then, seems to be the exceptional case in terms of the connection between affiliation and moral beliefs. But its ideological strength is as a movement not a religious body.

Third, none of the statistical models discussed above have much explanatory power. Burdette et al. (2005: 88) explain only 18% of the variance in attitudes toward physician-assisted suicide, Steensland et al. (2000: 306–307) explain only 11.1% of the variance in abortion beliefs, and Evans (2002a: 753) explains only 2% of the variance in beliefs about cloning. Thus, although in each case there is a statistically significant correlation between tradition and beliefs, the explanatory power of tradition is quite weak. Taken together, this suggests that something *other than* religious tradition explains most of the difference in these moral attitudes. What exactly that “other” could be is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that, if there is a weak relationship between religious bodies and warranting and purposive beliefs, there seems to be an even weaker relationship when considering implementing beliefs.

Conclusion

Connecting the official teachings of religious bodies to the beliefs of individual adherents is fraught with difficulty, some of it insurmountable. It appears that the most dynamic sectors of the American religious economy are *post-denominational*. Where denominations still matter, they are *post-doctrinal*, in the sense that confessional beliefs are not of central importance. Furthermore, although we can use more general measures of religious affiliation to predict a variety of moral beliefs, the explanatory power of those measures is weak, suggesting something other than denomination or tradition is more important. In this concluding section, therefore, I would like to highlight very briefly some ways that sociologists of religion can move forward, including ways to go beyond the emphasis on beliefs that so often turns into a dead end.

Bringing Congregations into the Picture

Although denominations are an organizational reality in American society, no one actually “belongs” to a denomination. People are members of particular congregations (Chaves, 2004: 21). These congregations are often, though decreasingly, affiliated with denominations, but most people’s experiences of denominations are wholly mediated by the local congregation to

which they belong. We would expect, therefore, that the connection or disconnect between denominational teaching and individual beliefs occurs at the congregational level.

More systematic empirical work needs to be done in this area, but a good starting point for thinking about this issue is the "Faith Communities Today" (FACT) study. Working through 41 denominational agencies representing some 90% of worshippers in America, the FACT partnership surveyed key informants in more than 14,000 congregations (Dudley and Roozen, 2001). The study's findings raise a question about the declining significance of denominational identity at the congregational level. Twenty-eight percent of congregations in the study report that they express "very well" their denominational heritage and another 34% say they express that heritage "quite well". By contrast, only 10% of congregations say they express their denominational heritage "slightly" and 3% say "not at all". Furthermore, and most relevant to this investigation, "congregations with a strong commitment to denominational heritage . . . have unusually high commitment to the foundational authority of creeds, doctrines and tradition" (Dudley and Roozen, 2001: 19). It would be interesting to know whether individuals in those congregations actually have higher levels of core doctrinal belief than individuals in congregations with lower commitment to denominational heritage or less commitment to their denomination's historic creeds, doctrines, and tradition. Future research, then, should look at these connections on three levels: individuals within congregations within denominations (see Chaves, 2004).

Reconceptualizing Beliefs

Another approach moving forward is to think about beliefs more broadly than as assent or lack of assent to various cognitive-propositional statements. Greeley has been arguing for such an approach for years now. According to Greeley (2000), if we want to understand the influence of religious traditions on individuals, we need to focus not on its *prose* or "cognitive superstructure" (doctrine) but on its *poetry* or "imaginative and narrative infrastructure" (experience, symbol, story, community, ritual). The poetry of a religious tradition can be found in the sensibility or "imagination" it cultivates. For Greeley, the Catholic imagination centers on God as present in the world, while the Protestant imagination stresses the separation of God from the world.

In various statistical analyses, Greeley finds these different religious imaginations to be significantly correlated with different social ethics. For example, "Catholics are less likely than Protestants to think taxes are too high. Catholics are more likely than Protestants to support government intervention in the economy, government ownership of industry, and equalization of income" (Greeley, 2000: 129). In general, "under ordinary circumstances, Catholics tend to picture society as supportive and not oppressive, while Protestants tend to picture society as oppressive and not supportive" (2000: 130). In the end, Greeley's argument forces us to consider that "the origins and raw power of religion are at the imaginative (that is, experiential

and narrative) level both for the individual and for the tradition” (2000: 4). Which is not to say that doctrine does not matter, but it does make it less central.

Enter Experience and Practice

If doctrine and belief are less central, experience and practice are more central. This is clearly shown in Dillon’s (1999) study of *Catholic Identity*. In an important analysis, Dillon compares Catholics who actively advocate for doctrinal change in the Roman Catholic Church on the highly charged issues of abortion, homosexuality, and women’s ordination (members of Catholics for a Free Choice, Dignity, and the Women’s Ordination Conference) to Catholics who staunchly support doctrinal orthodoxy in the church (members of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights). There could not be two groups of Catholics more diametrically opposed in their views of Catholic doctrine than these two groups, and yet Dillon finds a vast common ground between them. “The attachment shared by conservative and pro-change Catholics to the church’s sacramental tradition would seem to offer a bridge over some of the doctrinal differences between these divergent groups.” Specifically, “both groups value the Mass as a core sacramental ritual of Catholicism” (Dillon, 1999: 207–208). It is the meaningful experiences of participating in the Catholic tradition that is at the core of their common identity, doctrinal differences notwithstanding.

If a focus on experience draws our attention to the roots of religious belief, a focus on *practices* leads us to a consideration of its fruits. For a large share of the American population, what is important about being religious is not cognitive but behavioral. In an essay on “lived religion”, Ammerman (1997: 368) observes, “For both the theologically well versed and the theologically inept, congregational membership has been consciously sought out as a way to support virtuous living”. Doing good deeds, making the world a better place to live, helping others, and so on; in other words, living by the Golden Rule. These “Golden Rule Christians”, as Ammerman (1997: 207) calls them, “are characterized by their moral practices and their lack of creed”. She continues, “The Golden Rule Christianity we see today is explicitly nonideological. That is, it is not driven by beliefs, orthodox or otherwise. Rather, it is based in practice and experience” (1997: 211). Although she is careful to note that this lived religion is not universal, Ammerman does maintain that Golden Rule Christianity as a form of religious practice “may in fact be the dominant form of religiosity among middle-class suburban Americans” (1997: 199).

By focusing on doctrine, these individuals appear to be unorthodox, uninformed, or unbelieving; but by focusing on practice, we can see an integrity of religious purpose that transcends doctrinal beliefs. Courtney Bender (2003) takes this focus on religious practice even further, beyond the boundaries of religious organizations entirely, in her study of a secular nonprofit organization that delivers meals for those suffering from AIDS. Like Ammerman, Bender finds that the way religion manifests itself in this setting is not in how people talk about what they believe, but in what they *do*.

Beyond Beliefs

Beliefs can be understood both as the particular religious tenets professed by an individual believer as well as the articles of faith of particular religious bodies. In this article, I have documented the difficulty of examining the relationship between individual and corporate beliefs. In the end, I contend that overemphasizing beliefs makes us lose sight not only of the symbolic and narrative quality of the religious imagination, but also of the fundamentally pragmatic and experiential spirit of American religion (Cimino and Lattin, 1998). Here I cannot help but recall Robert Bellah (1970: 196) famously quoting the poet Wallace Stevens, “We believe without belief, beyond belief”.

Like Bellah, I am not arguing that people do not have religious beliefs or that beliefs are not consequential. Indeed, Christian Smith (2003) has persuasively argued that human beings are fundamentally moral and *believing* animals. But the traditional doctrinal, creedal, and confessional teachings of religious bodies are not the most significant aspect of individuals’ “everyday theologies” (Moon, 2004). If religion in America has moved beyond beliefs in this sense, the sociology of religion in America ought to follow suit.

NOTES

Thanks to Molly Averitt for research assistance and to Adam Blincoe and Lauren Henderson for their helpful readings of this article in draft form.

¹ It is also important to note that religious identification in America is overwhelmingly Christian. Despite some increases in other world religions in the United States, only 1.3% of Americans self-identify as Jewish, 0.5% as Muslim, 0.5% as Buddhist, and 0.4% as Hindu (Kosmin et al., 2001). The focus of this article on Christian bodies and beliefs is dictated by this reality.

² See the website of “The Confessing Church Movement Within The Presbyterian Church (USA)” (<http://www.confessingchurch.homestead.com/>). Finke and Stark (2005: 277) also discuss this movement as a sectarian development attempting to revitalize the mainline from within.

³ The PCUSA *Book of Confessions* is available in its entirety on the denomination’s website (<http://www.pcusa.org/oga/publications/boc.pdf>).

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